



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

FEDERAL/STATE PARTNERSHIP

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A Look at the Work of State Humanities Councils

State humanities councils are nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations governed by volunteer boards of directors. They operate in each of the fifty states as well as in the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa. Each council receives funds annually from NEH according to a statutory formula. In accordance with the federal mandate, every NEH dollar a council receives is matched by local contributions of cash, goods, or services. The Endowment protects the federal investment by ensuring that state councils are strong organizations capable of delivering high quality humanities programming. It does so by collaborating with them on a regularly updated, state-of-the-art self-assessment and evaluation process, and by maintaining high levels of accountability.

State humanities councils have two major ways to support the humanities in their jurisdictions: They grant a portion of their funds on a competitive basis to locally initiated programs, and they develop and carry out their own programs. In their grant-making role, they act as foundations from which eligible organizations and individuals seek funding; in their program-generating role, they are nonprofit service providers drawing on their own resources and looking to the public to support the benefits they offer. Schools, libraries, historical societies, museums, literacy programs, filmmakers, teachers, researchers, writers, and storytellers are among the organizations and people with which the state humanities councils work. State humanities councils strengthen the bonds of community by bringing citizens together to discuss issues of importance in the humanities.

The councils support thousands of humanities projects and programs every year that reach over three hundred million Americans in rural areas, urban neighborhoods, and suburban communities. With funds provided through the NEH Federal/Partnership, the councils provide support for: reading and discussion programs for children, families, and the newly literate that take place in libraries and other civic places; state and local book festivals, as well as the participation of a number of councils in the annual National Book Festival sponsored by the Library of Congress's Center for the Book; educational institutes and seminars for elementary and secondary school teachers; scholarship on state and local history and culture, such as comprehensive online state encyclopedias; exhibitions at museums, libraries, and historical sites; and radio, television, and film projects on humanities themes. They carry out an increasing amount of programming and

communications electronically, using websites, electronic newsletters, social networking, podcasting, and RSS feeds. A number of councils post videos on YouTube.

With their strong networks of cultural and educational institutions, state humanities councils are especially well-positioned to ensure that NEH's Picturing America has a broad reach as part of their We the People programming. The Michigan Humanities Council created a museum partnership grant program that allowed students to visit leading state museums to see American art first hand in tours tailored to complement Picturing America. It also implemented Picturing America teacher seminars. Humanities Council SC used its WTP funds to host two free public programs on "Picturing America: How Art Helps Us Understand America."

Councils tailor programming around the ethnic diversity of their states' populations. The councils in both Maine and Minnesota have published bilingual Somali-English books. The California Council for the Humanities funded two recent documentaries, "Stories from Baghdad, U.S.A." and "The Ethiopians of Los Angeles." Beginning in 2004, the Kansas Humanities Council has provided funding to state organizations to give various ethnic groups the opportunity to tell and record the stories of their communities in Kansas. Stories recorded to date include oral histories of Southeast Asians settling in Garden City, a Low German language preservation project in Marshall and Washington counties, and an exhibit on the Kickapoo native American tribe. Together these stories provide a clearer, more complete, picture of what it means to be a Kansan today. Speakers bureaus and reading and discussion programs of many councils feature international topics. The Nebraska Humanities Council, in partnership with Nebraska Public Television and MacNeil/Lehrer Productions' "By the People" initiative, supports community discussions on America's role in the world.

State humanities councils across the country make it possible for citizens to come together to address issues related to the economy, health care, demographics, energy, and our schools, through discussions informed by history and literature. Such in-depth explorations of critical and potentially divisive issues serve purposes beyond creating more thoughtful and better-informed citizens. They also increase citizen engagement in public life and bring citizens together to work toward common goals in shaping the future of their community and nation. The New Hampshire Humanities Council sponsored extended programming with public forums and thoughtful community discussions about "Shifting Ground: Religion & Civic Life in America." This initiative is being continued with "God and the Commons" which adds the lenses of history and philosophy and explores how participants' ideas and insights might be turned into specific actions. The Arizona Humanities Council's "Project Civil Discourse" is an example of a statewide effort to create respectful dialogue and discourse on public issues. Working with a broad array of partners, including the Arizona School Boards Association, Arizona Town Hall, and the Arizona State University Center for Civic Education and Leadership, among many others, the council offers training, forums on specific topics, speaker presentations, book discussions, and special events that provide insight into collaborative problem-solving.

To ensure depth and seriousness of reflection, some councils have selected topics of specific concern to citizens of their states and shaped year-long events to explore each topic. The Illinois Humanities Council is conducting such an initiative, in conjunction with over 20 partner organizations, entitled “All Consuming: Conversations on Oil and Water,” which invites Illinoisans to join the council in using the humanities “to ask how

access to and control and consumption of oil and water play out in the past, current, and future geopolitical environment.” The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities uses electronic media to initiate discussions through their “Backstory with the American History Guys” radio call-in show, which features three prominent historians providing perspective on “events happening around us every day.”

Because the written word is the currency of ideas, most state humanities councils promote reading and literacy. Many councils support such family literacy programs as Motherhead, a nationally acclaimed non-profit organization that combines the teaching of literacy skills with child development and family empowerment, and Prime Time Family Reading Time, developed by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, which provides reading, discussion, and storytelling programs for young children and their parents. Thirty-nine councils support literacy programming and all sponsor discussion programs, most of which are based on the common reading of texts.

Councils take an active role in providing K-12 teachers professional development opportunities and humanities curriculum support. The Minnesota Humanities Center offers teacher institutes that range from short half-day programs to week-long institutes led by regional and national humanities scholars. The Alabama Humanities Foundation offers both week-long and one-day teacher seminars. It is also linked with the statewide interactive resource database and the distance learning network, making professional development opportunities widely available throughout the state. The Connecticut Humanities Council offers a web-based resource center that allows users to search by grade level or topic to find lesson plans, field trips and professional development opportunities for teachers and students offered by Connecticut’s museums, historical societies, and cultural organizations. During the summer of 2009, the councils in Florida and Wyoming held NEH Landmarks of American History and Culture workshops for teachers, and the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities hosted the NEH-supported seminar for college and university teachers “Roots 2009: African Dimensions of the History and Culture of the Americas.”